

Plastic waste from foreign nations dumped in East Java village

By Owen Howell
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Since last year a small rice farming village in East Java called Bangun has become a dumping ground for global waste. Piles of recyclable waste cover the streets and hide houses from view. Whole paddy fields are blanketed in huge heaps of rubbish which grow higher and wider each day as delivery trucks from Surabaya offload tonne after tonne of foreign shipments.

When China announced in January 2018 that it would no longer import the bulk of the world's recyclable waste, developed nations began to look for other offshore dumping grounds. The government ban on imports of 24 types of waste material was prompted by noticeable pollution in water and air, due to the nature of the recycling process and poor residual waste management.

Several Western countries export recyclables as a cheap alternative to onshore processing, thus shoving the problem elsewhere at the economic and environmental expense of poorer nations. For years, they had relied on China's recycling industry and were suddenly faced with a serious dilemma. The "solution" was to redirect the exports to South East Asia.

Channel News Asia reported that between 2016 and 2018 plastic waste imports in South East Asia grew by a staggering 171 percent. The Ocean Conservancy lobby revealed in a study that Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam were now among the top five countries in the world that were throwing plastic into the sea, with China at number one.

Because of laws in ASEAN nations prohibiting the importation of recyclable plastic, Western countries sent their unwanted plastic, along with other non-recyclable items, concealed within shipping containers of scrap paper. However, in recent months, local custom officials have cracked down and are examining these containers more closely on arrival. If

discovered to be hiding illegal plastic materials, they are returned to their countries of origin.

Malaysia has promised to return 450 tonnes of contaminated paper waste and outlined a total ban on plastic imports to be put into effect within the next three years. At least 100 unregulated plastic recycling plants appeared across Malaysia in response to the enormous influx of nearly half a million tonnes of plastic in the first half of last year.

Last month the Philippines sent 69 shipping containers back to Canada after a long diplomatic row over violations of import rules. The containers were stored on the docks for five years before the Trudeau administration finally agreed to compromise with the Philippine government.

In answer to this growing catastrophe, the UN attempted in May to implement greater control over waste exports, by making an amendment to the Basel Convention. It was a treaty that controlled the movement of hazardous waste from one country to another and required exporters to gain the explicit consent of the importers. Without delay, 187 countries agreed to the new UN amendment.

The amendment, however, was soon proven to have little effect on the Western powers seeking to offload their plastic waste.

Indonesia received five containers from the US in June, contaminated with plastic and various other materials. Last Tuesday customs officials in Surabaya found that eight containers from Australia were concealing a range of plastics and household wastes including aluminium cans, plastic drink bottles, electronic devices and used nappies. In addition, the same Surabaya port is now investigating 58 containers from the US and Germany suspected to be holding plastic. Last week, customs officials on Batam Island

announced their rejection of 49 containers from the US, Australia, France, Germany and Hong Kong.

Indonesia witnessed a massive rise in imported waste following the ban in China: from 10,000 tonnes per month in 2017 to 35,000 tonnes per month in 2018, according to the *Jakarta Post*. In Java, starting from last year, every day 40 to 50 trucks bring about 75 tonnes of waste to villages in Mojokerto Regency, of which Bangun is just one.

Bangun is an obvious destination for the dumping of this waste because it is home to four paper mills. The biggest, PT Pakerin, pays villagers to sort through the waste and separate paper from plastic. The factory workers come to collect the paper, while the villagers sell the plastic to tofu factories to be processed into industrial fuels. Any unwanted plastic is burnt on the banks of the Brantas River.

Previously impoverished peasants, most Bangun residents have sold their farms and currently work as waste collectors for the paper mills. The Indonesian government has allowed the flow of rubbish into the village to continue as locals are now dependent on waste sorting. On average they earn around 700,000 rupiah (\$US50) a day, a large increase on their previous income.

One resident named Gimán, 56, explained to *Tribun Jatim* reporters that the money made from plastic waste has fulfilled everyday necessities previously denied to him and his neighbours: “You can eat every day... you can enrol your children in school until S2 [Master’s degree].”

The villagers were dismayed to hear of the government’s decision to reject containers holding plastic waste. East Java governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa visited Bangun and declared that the provincial government “must provide a solution for the choice of new income options for residents.” This is nothing more than a token gesture.

The health impact of huge piles of plastic waste in Bangun is already becoming evident. The waste has already polluted the Brantas River, the source of drinking water for millions of Javanese people. Environmental research organisation Ecoton found that 80 percent of its fish are contaminated with microplastics. Further, it is widely known that plastic, when exposed to sunlight over time, can release gases that contribute to global warming.

Around 300 million tonnes of plastic are produced every year, much of it being dumped in landfills or the sea. The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last year: “Plastics are wonderful, highly useful materials. Their reckless disposal, however, is a major factor in the environmental degradation and climate change that threaten devastating consequences for humanity and all life on Earth.”

The author recommends:

Waste plastics poison the food chain and contribute to global warming
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